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ABSTRACT

Summer camp is a type of laboratory for community living. Society's needs have changed from providing a positive summer challenge for idle youth to experimenting with the demands and rewards of working in community groups. Decentralized camping emphasizes the team decision-making approach to teach self-reliance and awareness of democratic responsibilities. Using the dynamics of group theory in staff training and in the supervision of the summer camping experience enhances teambuilding. Based on transactional analysis theory, camp groups move through four stages as they gain independence and assume responsibilities: child, adolescent, adult, and parent. Initially, leadership in the camp group is provided by the counselor but as the group matures, leadership evolves from within. The counselor's role in the maturing group is that of a guide, leading by example, using creative feedback to help campers learn from their actions, and serving as a moderator and facilitator. Several steps are proposed to ensure that campers develop positive attitudes about themselves and their future community roles: (1) structuring decision-making experiences; (2) sharing leadership activities; (3) dealing openly with issues; (4) participating with the group; (5) emphasizing the importance of all group members; (6) creating activity schedules that allow a variety of children to excel; (7) structuring team-building exercises; (8) integrating cliques into the group; (9) approaching problem solving democratically; (10) emphasizing attempt versus outcome; and (11) interpreting the process and the task involved in activities. (ALL)

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BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CAMPING

by

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BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CAMPING

The summer camp offers youngsters a multitude of opportunities to discover the richness of life around them. Many look forward all year to rejoining distant friends and taking on new challenges that may not exist outside the special world of camping. Part of the apparent magic is the bonding of campers and staff into a special community that at least for the short time they are there can make its own rules based on the needs of its constituency. Handled properly, this community spirit can have a positive effect on the children's future participation in the world of man. It takes more than magic, however. Groups exist - communities are built.

Organized camping grew out of a unique set of circumstances in mid-19th Century American society. The urbanization of the population over a short period of time left people with an appreciation of the values of native Americans and their close relationship with the natural world. At the same time, children who had previously spent their summers working to clear land or maintain the family's rural homestead, were now faced with many idle, often unproductive hours. In addition, the Civil War celebrated the comradeship of men and boys living primitively in communal encampments. These factors among others contributed to the development of what we now know as the summer camp.

Perceptive educators were the first to realize the potential for augmenting structured academic learning by setting up summer expeditions to remote wilderness areas, where the lessons took the form of living in groups, the value of hard work and a spiritual attachment to the land.[1] Although these early camps sprang up independently in many locations, the chronicled benefits to the campers shared a number of common elements. Chief among these was the *teambuilding* effect of living and working together for uninterrupted blocks of time.

Another curious phenomenon was noted in the journals of the early camp leaders. Hedley Dimock, a former professor at George Williams College, summed up this phenomenon in his evolutionary theory of the camping movement.[2] He stated that as camping was developed by the Settlement Houses and other community agencies integrating diverse ethnic elements into American society, they noticed the

groups seemed to work together better and were more accepting of cultural differences in camp than in the urban environment. The summer camp appeared to have a magic ability to blend various social elements into a working community.

There are a number of situations built into the structure of organized camping that lend themselves to the formation of groups. Campers live together in cabin or tent groups. They travel together on trips, share new experiences in activity groups and meet regularly with the same children in unit or camp-wide programs. Decentralized camping actually emphasizes the team decision-making approach in order to teach self-reliance and an awareness of our democratic responsibilities.

Nelson Weiters has identified three additional "environments" of organized camping that act as catalysts to community development.3 The first is related to the *uninterrupted time element* that exists in the resident camp. There is no division in the day between home, school, church, or free time. The camper is able to learn consistently throughout a full session while receiving constant feedback and reinforcement from his counselors and peers. At the same time, learning does not have to be forced into a specified time block which may not coincide with the camper's willingness or ability to receive it. Instead, the *teachable moment* can be used to highlight learning when and where it actually takes place.

Secondly, the camp is a *child's world* , a place where the camper is not a second class citizen or an adult waiting to grow up. Instead, they are the center of activity, their values and needs are respected, and they have a chance to grow and develop age- appropriate skills in a supportive, non-judgmental environment.

Finally, the setting of the organized camp provides a constant *testing ground of challenges* that don't require prior skills or knowledge to succeed. The variety of physical, creative and intellectual challenges stimulates the camper to grow holistically, allowing each child the chance to discover her true abilities. This encourages participation and cooperation among the group throughout the multitude of new experiences in the summer camp environment.

If all of these elements common to the camp structure lend themselves well to the formation of groups and community, why worry about forcing teambuilding, when it appears to happen naturally? Unfortunately, the building of social skills and healthy groups is not automatic, even in the resident camp. It is a bit like placing all the freshest ingredients for a meal on the table and assuming nothing is required of the cook or server. Someone must stir the kettle.

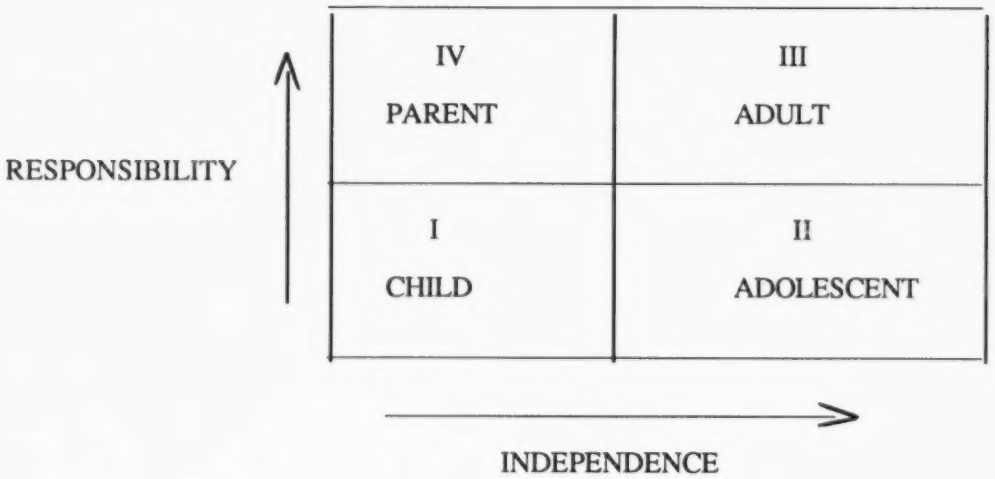
Cliff Knapp, in Humanizing Environmental Education,[4] describes a number of elements that characterize a fully functioning community:

(1) *Community members understand their purpose for being together- their goals are clear;*
(2) *They know the rules under which they will be operating and in turn know their areas of freedom;*
(3) *They also understand that they have a degree of power in decision-making and a feeling that their opinions count;*
(4) *They know that although leadership responsibilities will be shared, the staff has the ultimate responsibility for the health and safety of the group. The staff must be respected and trusted;*
(5) *Trust must extend throughout the entire community for growth to occur. A degree of safety and comfort must exist for a community to function effectively;*
(6) *Mutual caring is the key to success in moving from a collection of individuals to a growing community.*

The degree to which this ideal community can be realized is proportionate to the emphasis the camp leadership places on promoting it. Their skills in human relations, knowledge of group and leadership theory, as well as a sensitivity to their camper population are all critical factors. Following is a basic primer for directors and front line staff interested in making the most out of camper group development.

BASIC GROUP THEORY

When children first arrive at camp, they are a group of individuals with unique backgrounds, experiences, skills and aspirations for the season. Many will be returning to the same camp with expectations based on their previous summer spent with a different group of peers. Others will be totally new to camping and look to the counselors and older campers for initial guidance. In the following diagram, taken from transactional analysis theory, the group is represented in box I as being in the "child" stage. This stage is characterized by a dependency on the staff for instruction, safety and limit setting.



This is a very important stage for the staff to demonstrate a number of consistent attitudes towards the group, including:

Trustworthiness

A sincere concern for the welfare and happiness of each child

An ability to set appropriate limits that will enable individual growth within a safe environment

A non-domineering attitude towards group decision making

An openness towards sharing feelings and support of individual opinions

A willingness to answer any questions, no matter how simple they may seem , yet not becoming too directive.

Establishing these parameters early in the session will allow the groups to move to the next, most chaotic stage of group development - the "adolescent." (Note that the stages described here refer to groups, not individuals, and how they grow.

The "adolescent" stage is characterized by exploration and experimentation with the established boundaries and leadership within the group. The children will soon perceive they have some control over the decisions effecting their lives in camp. This realization often leads to one or two outgoing campers taking charge and beginning to lead the group in such a manner as may benefit primarily themselves. This may include lobbying for activities they prefer, taking a negative attitude towards those they dislike and trying to rally group support to challenge the leadership of the counselor. The group at this point resembles the all too familiar adolescent who doesn't seem to have anything at all on his mind but being difficult.

"Adolescence" is as important for group development as it is for individual growth. It is the means by which self-reliance begins to replace dependence on adult directions. Making their own decisions and standing behind them allows the group to mature and learn to become responsible members of a community. Yet early attempts at this often seem contradictory and irrational when viewed from the outside.

The key during this stage is not to overreact, but to remain consistent with the attitudes established in the first stage. Limits must be maintained and a sense of openness to differing opinions valued, yet the struggle for leadership and idea processing must be tolerated, even encouraged. Also important at this point is the modelling of good social skills. These include expression of individual points of view, awareness of how our actions affect others in the group, the responsibility of the group for their own safety, and use of different styles of leadership to encourage positive followership. The age of the group

will determine how much directive teaching will be required versus a more passive, facilitating approach - the former necessary when working with younger children, the latter more effective with older campers.

With sensitive guidance and support from the staff, the group will eventually move on to the "adult" stage. A desire to become more organized and secure, coupled with a better awareness of the more sincere leadership in the group, will foster more "adult-type" decision making. This stage is a great relief to the counselors and other staff who have been tested to the limits of patience with the "adolescent" stage. At this point they should feel a stronger bond growing between them and the group, brought about by a common interest in the enjoyment of camp for everyone.

"Adults" tend to make more rational decisions than "children," but the staff must again take the age of the campers into consideration. The biggest difference between younger and older campers during stage III is the ability of the older ones to connect one experience with another in formulating decisions. Abstract thinking is not refined until approximately age fourteen, making it difficult for younger campers to apply learning from one situation to another.5

Many groups never progress beyond stage III, making reasonably sound decisions concerning the group, but guided primarily by self-interest. Only when true consideration for the other members of the group takes precedence over individual needs do they enter the fourth and final stage, "parenthood." This term accurately depicts a stage of universal thinking and forethought about the effects a decision will have on other group members, much the way a parent often seems more concerned with their children's welfare than their own.

It is probably unreasonable to expect all but the oldest of campers in an ideal community environment to reach stage IV over the course of several weeks . Self-interest is a characteristic of children that is difficult to overcome. Staff should not feel disappointed if they do not observe this ultimate group stage. However, it is helpful to be aware of the theoretical extension of group development in terms of evaluating the progression and lending a hand along the way. There are also many obvious factors that effect this

progression, and no two groups will ever develop exactly the same way or within the same time period. This is what characterizes the uniqueness of each group much the way personality differs in each child.

LEADERSHIP AND THE GROUP PROCESS

Certain parameters within the structure of any group govern the way the individuals interact. The first of these is leadership. Although quality leadership demands a great deal of skill and experience, if left to its own devices, every group will create some form of leader/follower relationship. It might be evidenced as autocratic, democratic or laissez-faire, even the latter being a form of organizing the group into a way of dealing with decisions. Avoidance of leadership will only inspire someone else to accept it.

In the camp setting, the counselor and program staff initially play a key leadership role within the group. They have the specific skills and knowledge to initiate action around various tasks. Yet very soon, campers will feel constrained by having no say in decision making, challenging the staff for control of the task. At this point, the staff should become facilitators of the group process and encourage sound leadership from within. They should try to play a direct leadership role only in issues of safety or when the existing leadership threatens to move in a dangerous or negative direction.

Followership is directly related to leadership; it is strongest when the leadership is best for that group in a particular situation. Consequently, followership is a good indication of the effectiveness of leadership, and feedback from the group can be used constructively to improve upon the style of leadership being used.

Three distinct approaches to leadership can be observed by watching how groups deal with various tasks.[6] The *trait approach* is evidenced when one or two individuals seem to have such superior worldly knowledge that they are willingly given control of the decision making process. This is exemplified by the initial respect and control afforded the camp director who makes an impressive opening address when the

campers arrive. Appearing to have universal knowledge about so many things, he is afforded an almost regal image.

The *situational approach* takes into consideration someone who has a greater skill in a particular situation or activity. This can be illustrated by a dynamic sailing instructor, who by virtue of his or her advanced skills is imitated and revered by budding young sailing students. When it comes to fire building or arts and crafts, the group expects little more guidance from them than they would anyone else.

And finally, the *group approach* is one in which the task is addressed equally by the entire group, and a consensus is required before any one person's ideas are given precedence over another. The emergent leadership is dependent upon superior skills, appropriate style and the direction agreed upon by the members. As we'll see later, this is usually the most productive approach for learning social skills and developing self-reliance.

Awareness of the advantages of each leadership approach will help staff choose the most appropriate one for the situation as well as be cognizant of what leadership dynamic exists within the group during a specific task. It also points out the importance of avoiding a dominant counselor role in making decisions, as this will hinder the development of the group approach.

Crucial to the understanding of group theory is the distinction between *task* and *process* . Any time a group goes about doing something, from preparing a meal over the fire to planning the next day's hike, there is both a task being addressed and a process that exists while doing it. We usually think in terms of the task only - when it was completed or how well it was done. The process includes such considerations as who was instrumental in completing the task, what style of leadership existed and who played a leadership role, who was supportive and who not, and how the individuals felt about their role in the task. Process is important because it generates the motivation to attempt the next task, takes some of the pressure off task completion, and teaches each group member how to become more productive based on their own particular strengths and weaknesses.

Groups are not only unique in their make-up of individuals, but those individuals will also vary from one moment to the next in their emotional, physical and spiritual capacities. These two variables lead each camper to play different roles within a group activity. For example, there are some children prone to answering questions very quickly without giving it much thought. Others are more reflective or even reticent to express their ideas. Some have great ability to influence, others very little. There are *peacemakers* who consciously attempt to avoid conflict or help give support to those frustrated with the group progress. Each of these is commonly present during group interaction, and although some roles appear more productive than others, they are all valid expressions of individual differences.

Based on personal issues that may be weighing on their minds, children's roles in the group will actually vary from one task to the next. They may have no energy to offer the group or may have their own concerns that are not task related. Comparison of the short and long term role each child takes in the group will aid the counselor in helping each one to grow. Playing an uncharacteristic role will also signal astute staff that a camper may be dealing with personal problems and need special consideration. If appropriate, the camper should be encouraged to share her feelings with the group to avoid further misunderstanding. (In this case, the counselor may need to consult the camp director for guidance before bringing up the issue.)

THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELOR

We've already discussed the staff role relative to leadership. If the counselors are not the leaders of the group, who are they? The answer to that question will vary, but includes a number of important possibilities.

Early in the session, the staff will be more directive in providing information than they will later on. This is important in setting rules and boundaries for the group and letting them know that some

decisions have to be made unilaterally. In this instance they are invoking an *autocratic* style of leadership, one not particularly effective for group development, but necessary nonetheless.

After this stage, usually phased out within the first several days of camp, the counselor becomes a *guide,* leading by example and becoming selectively responsive to each child's needs. They must be careful, however, not to influence the campers towards their own personal interests. Quality counseling responds to both the overt and unspoken feelings of the individuals, and through modelling offers several alternatives for action.

Another duty of the counselor is to explain and use creative feedback to help campers learn from their actions. This must be prefaced with an explanation that feedback is a gift that should be welcomed by the recipient, not viewed as threatening. The feedback is not fact, but an observation subject to the interpretation of the observer. It should always be qualified by, "It is my feeling that ...," or "What I think I'm seeing is ...," not accusingly, as in, "You are ...." The recipient is then encouraged to use the "gift" if they are able and willing or to simply ignore it at their own discretion. This approach will avoid mistaking constructive feedback for insults or accusations, producing defensiveness instead of awareness.

Explaining feedback is just one way of creating an environment in which children feel safe to take risks leading to growth. The counselor should take pains to prevent belittling or chiding that excludes membership in the group. Feelings should be given respect and highly valued, remembering they are never right or wrong, only real, and they should be aired whenever possible. Learning to express feelings appropriately is an important step towards healthy social behavior in the community.

The counselor will also be called upon to become the *moderator* when the group seems threatened by dissention. Often the emotional issues become so prominent during decision making, that a staff person must help the group distinguish one issue from another before moving on. It is inviting trouble down the road to ignore these underlying issues for the sake of task completion, as they can only be resolved through direct confrontation. Using the *teachable moment* , stopping the activity to discuss the dominant issues, is the most effective means to help the group learn to deal with conflict.

There will be times when an individual, no matter how supportive the environment, feels excluded or rejected by the group. It is especially true of children that their own needs often come before any concerns for their peers, and this may surface as a child feeling left out or unwanted. Here the counselor must simply be a *friend* to the camper. It is easy to see the isolation and rejection on the face of a child, and a few warm words, coupled with a great deal of empathic listening, can go a long way towards bringing them back into the community. Soliciting the aid of the group may or may not be effective and should only be attempted once the root of the trouble has been clearly established.

Counselors should learn as much as possible from their own experiences as campers, remembering how influential staff can be on the minds of young children. Both good and bad modelling will be observed and often imitated by the group. However, if the staff is willing to admit their fallibility, there is no long term harm in occasional poor judgment. The lesson to be learned from admitting mistakes far exceeds the momentary lapse in exemplary behavior.

Very often counselors just need to get out of the way of group development. A mature, dominant personality can often prevent development of leadership and acceptance of responsibility that leads to community involvement. It is often easier to solve problems for the group than to stand aside and let them struggle with the issues that will strengthen them and promote self-reliance. There are times when the autocratic approach is called for, but more often than not, the group will benefit in the long run by having to work through a consensus style of decision making.

The counselor does not have an easy job. Anyone having experienced such a position will agree wholeheartedly. However, thinking in terms of being a *facilitator* instead of a teacher or leader will make the job more reasonable and allow the campers to become allies rather than the enemy. The counselor can be more effective by providing the atmosphere for learning than by trying too hard to be a teacher.

MAKING GROUPS WORK!

Children are children; that is to say, they are not "little adults." They have different ways of perceiving the world and reacting to it. Counselors often make the mistake when working with campers of projecting their own feelings and thoughts on the younger group. Then they can't understand what appears to them as irrational behavior.

Camps should not resemble factories for turning out young adults, yet they can be a useful learning experience in living in a communal society and functioning both as healthy individuals and productive group members. In addition to sensitizing staff to the group dynamics discussed earlier in this article, there are several positive steps that can be taken to ensure campers will leave feeling better about themselves and their role in the community:

1) Structured experiences in decision-making will help resolve frustration centering around internal conflict. Campers need to learn that acceptable compromises can be attained and are often preferable to always having things their own way.

2) Appointing a "leader for the day" or sharing the leadership of activities is a good way for campers to experiment with this role and learn to accept feedback from peers about the effectiveness of their style. Assignments can be as simple as preparing a prayer, setting tables or supervising cabin cleaning.

3) Campers should be encouraged to deal openly with issues about which they have strong feelings rather than to talk behind people's backs. Counselors must model this behavior and set up structured sharing times in the cabin to seek out problems before they become overwhelming. During these sessions, it is critical that the group listen to and respect everyone's opinions. Nothing creates exclusion more quickly than insensitive laughter or rejection of what an individual values highly. Twenty minutes before

bedtime could be set aside for sharing, but it's also important to show a priority for this by stopping any activity when necessary to air feelings. Remember the "teachable moment."

4) Demand inclusion in the group. If a camper seems to be pulling away from their peers, find out why and let them know they are important to the group. This has even more power if expressed by the group itself.

5) Our society tends to overemphasize competition; children grow up with this from a very early age. Camp should be one place where individuals are given credit for their efforts, and the joy of working with others should take precedence over solo accomplishments.

6) Create an activity schedule on a daily or weekly basis where different children will excel. Too much emphasis on physical skills or activities where a camper with prior experience has an advantage will reinforce the inferiority feelings of a non-achiever. Try to imagine what strengths a camper can demonstrate, and let her have a chance to succeed in the eyes of her peers.

7) Many lessons in group interaction can be learned by structured "teambuilding" exercises. These include non-competitive games, trust activities, ropes course and group initiative problems. Building these into the beginning of each session and reinforcing the lessons throughout gives the campers a chance to apply what they are learning about groups. Several good resources for ideas are provided in the bibliography at the end of this article.

8) Cliques are very common among groups of children. Returning campers are apt to bond together to demonstrate "superiority" over the new ones. Those who know each other from home are natural buddies. Individuals with like abilities or interests tend to stick together. These are normal and not necessarily destructive, but attention should be paid early in camp to integrate cliques more fully into the entire group.

9) Foster a democratic approach to problem solving, allowing divergent elements within the group their say. Spend time each day helping the group become comfortable with different leadership styles, so long as the group's interests are the primary focus.

10) Help campers learn the importance of initiative and individual effort, while downplaying the perception of "failure." A fully functional individual must persevere along many a rough road. Yet in this age of instant gratification, many children are turned off by initial frustrations. Placing the emphasis on the attempt versus the outcome will show campers the higher rewards only attainable through hard work and dedication to a project.

11) Finally, spend time helping to interpret both the process and the task observed during activities and interactions. Camp is really a type of laboratory for group living, and children need to make connections to their "real" lives in order to take full advantage of what they learn. They also need processing in order to express their feelings and validate their experiences.

Using a sound foundation of group theory in staff training and supervision of the summer camping experience will guarantee the benefits of teambuilding the early founders perceived as natural. The needs of society have changed from simply providing a positive summer challenge for idle youth to experimenting with the demands and rewards of working within a community. There is no arena more prepared or uniquely adapted to learning this valuable lesson than the summer camp.

Robert L. Rubendall, Jr.
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Footnotes

1) The Gunnery Camp is usually given credit for the first organized camping expedition in the summer of 1861. It was attended by the students and faculty of the Gunnery School in Connecticut.

2) Eells, Eleanor (1986). History of Organized Camping: The First 100 Years. Martinsville, Indiana: American Camping Association, pp. 140-141.

3) Weiters, Nelson. Lecture notes from Camp Directors' Institutes.

4) Knapp, Clifford E., & Goodman, Joel (1981). Humanizing Environmental Education: A Guide for Leading Nature and Human Nature Activities. Martinsville: American Camping Association, p. 50.

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6) Rodney, Lynn S., & Ford, Phyllis M. (1971) Camp Administration. New York: Ronald Press, pp. 128-135.

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8) Simpson, Benjy (Ed). (1978). Initiative Games. Available through Colorado Outward Bound School, 945 Pennsylvania Street, Denver, CO. 80203